

**can't you see them? (can't you feel them?) by
ToAStranger**

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They're breathing down your neck.

can't you see them? (can't you feel them?)

Author's Note:

- For [brawlite](#), [lymricks](#), [nimadge](#), [hoppnhorn](#).

FINALLY THE NIGHTMARE ENDS!

Shout out to my most supportive babes. <3

The summer after El closes the Gate, Steve Harrington goes missing.

His car is still in the driveway. His front door is locked. His parents aren't home.

Billy only knows this because Max and her stupid fucking friends won't shut up about it.

“God, Dustin, he's probably just -- like, on a trip with his parents or something!”

Billy knows she thinks she's being quiet, being subtle, about the two boys hovering outside her window, but she's not. Billy can hear it all where he's sat out on the front porch, boots kicked up against the paint chipped railing, tipped back in a ratty lawn chair to light up.

Max is just lucky he's blowing this joint the second he has enough dough stashed from his summer gig at the autoshop. She's just lucky he doesn't care anymore. She's just lucky that his dad took Susan out to dinner one town over.

“While that's not totally out of the realm of possibility, he would've *said something* first.” Dustin replies, and Max shushes him.

“Well, maybe his parents surprised him and it was last minute or something.”

There's the click of a tongue and then Lucas Sinclair's voice. “She's kinda got a point, man. I don't think --”

"I'm telling you guys, something feels weird about this. Like, *Upside Down* weird." Dustin insists, and Billy has no idea what that means, but he hears them stress it often enough, in hushed tones.

They're about as subtle as a bat full of nails to the junk.

"You're overreacting," Max says, right as Billy clicks open his lighter and lights up, breathing out smoke into the night air. "And you guys have to go before my parents get home."

That's good, Billy thinks. She's learning.

He listens to the rattle of bikes, to the long goodbye of kids too young to know that goodbyes are for important things, and watches as the two idiots bumble around the corner of the house toward the street.

He drags hard on his cigarette, clears his throat, and takes a keen kind of pleasure out of the way they both nearly jump out of their skin when they see him. He grins, all sharp white teeth, when Lucas slaps at Dustin's shoulder.

"Boys," he says.

"Uh," Dustin's eyes are big and wide under the rim of his ball cap. "Hey , Billy. Nice night, isn't it? Real good for a late night walk. Gotta love these summer nights--"

"Dude, shut *up* --"

"I'm just saying--"

"Don't you two know better than to come hanging around here?" Billy asks.

Both their mouths press thin.

While the events of November loomed over their heads in the months that followed, time also brought understanding. An understanding that the Hargrove residence is a dangerous place for them to be seen. That it isn't just Billy they need to avoid. That Billy isn't the only monster in the house.

Eventually, Dustin clears his throat, looking almost apologetic. “We were just--”

“I don’t care,” Billy huffs, drags on his cigarette, and then shoves to his feet. “Get lost.”

“Right. Yeah. We were just-- yeah.” Dustin bobs his head, and Lucas is already tugging him away by the back of his shirt. “See you, Billy!”

Billy snorts as he watches them scurry off, Lucas hissing something at Dustin under his breath, and he takes one last pull before flicking the bud out into the yard. He watches as it burns out into nothing, as the two boys disappear in the dusk down the road, before turning and walking inside.

Steve Harrington isn’t officially declared missing until the end of June. He’s been gone for two weeks, or so Dustin Henderson estimates when he radios Max in the middle of the night, and the only reason anyone is taking any official action now is because his parents came home to an empty, dusty home, with food molding on the countertop, and no note.

Billy can hear him through the wall. He’s half-tempted to get out of bed, to bang against it and tell Max to keep it down, but his dad sleeps like the dead and Billy wants to hear *more* .

Steve Harrington is *actually* missing.

“What did Hopper say?” Max asks, and Billy can practically see her, curled over the radio in bed, red hair everywhere, eyes wide and mouth pinched.

Her worried face. Billy doesn’t really know why, but he knows those kids adore Steve-- Max included.

“Well, I don’t exactly know the particulars, but I know that there’s a search party going out tomorrow.”

“Into the woods?” Max asks. “It’s been *weeks* . What-- I mean, what

are they even *looking* for?"

Billy knows what she's really asking. Is blown away by the fact that his thirteen year old step-sister can even *think* about shit like that, let alone ask about it, and something pits in his belly as he thinks it too.

It's been weeks. What do they expect to *find* ?

"*I don't know*," comes Dustin's reply, a pause too long and too heavy for a bunch of kids barely out of prepubescence. "*I don't-- I don't know.*"

"What are we gonna *do*?"

"*We're gonna find him.*"

Billy doesn't know how. Doesn't know what that could mean.

But he kinda hopes the kid is right.

Billy doesn't join the search party.

He watches, early in the morning, as Max packs up a bag with sandwiches Susan makes for her. Watches as she stuffs her bag full with supplies, with food, and with the flashlight his dad reluctantly hands over.

Watches as he places a careful hand on her shoulder and *burns* as he treats her with so much care and chiding that it's painful to see.

"You won't be needing this because you'll be home before dark," his dad says. "Billy will drop you off and pick you up in the same spot. Understand?"

Max blinks up at him and then over at Billy, and nods her head. "I understand."

"Good," and then his father is looking at Billy, expectant and firm and with none of that kindness. "Billy?"

“Yes, sir.” Billy says, and pushes his half-eaten breakfast away. “I’ll pick her up right after I get off work and have her home before sundown.”

“See that you do.”

“Let’s go, Max.”

She follows him, silent, out the front door and over to the Camaro. She climbs in after he’s already started the engine, and he can already see the protest on her face before she even voices it.

Billy grits his teeth. His fingers flex over the wheel. He’s trying, really, to be better. He’s trying not to ever put that look of pure hate and fear on her face again.

He can’t help if he gets angry. If he feels like screaming to the music pouring out of his radio until his voice is gone. If he feels like he needs to hurt something, to break something apart.

But he’s trying to avoid directing that at her. He doesn’t want her to look at him like he looks at his own dad.

“Billy--”

“*Don’t*,” he says. “I’ll drop you off. I’ll pick you up. I’ll take you home. What you do after that? That’s up to you. That’s *on you*. Get it?”

She deflates into the passenger seat, but nods. “You won’t tell if I sneak out?”

“I won’t be home,” Billy shrugs a shoulder. “You’ll be their responsibility. If you sneak out on their watch, why should I give a fuck?”

They drive the rest of the way in silence. It isn’t until he’s rolling up, pulling to a stop next to a line of other cars, a gathering of people not far from where they’re all pulled off the side of the road at the treeline, that Max says anything at all.

“Thanks, Billy.”

“You got a watch?” he asks, and she nods her head like a bobble doll.
“Be back here, *right here* , by five.”

“Five-thirty.”

“ *Five* , Maxine.”

Max rolls her eyes and jerks the passenger door open. “*Fine.*”

She doesn't slam it shut in his face, but it's a close thing. Billy bites his cheek to keep from grinning. He watches as she bounds off to meet up with her friends who are straggled off to the side, standing in a small circle and waiting for her, and wonders if she's going to grow out of that sass or more into it.

He hopes it's the latter.

After work, after dropping Max off at home, Billy heads to the quarry. There's supposed to be a rager, Carol had told him when she saw him on his lunch break at the coffee shop, in memory of Steve Harrington's ghost.

It's kind of sick, that they're partying and getting trashed in the memory of someone who they don't even know is dead yet. But Billy likes free booze and he wants to get trashed and he doesn't want to think about Max or her little friends stumbling across Steve Harrington's *body* somewhere in those woods.

He doesn't want to think about Steve Harrington being *dead* .

It isn't like he and Harrington were *friends*. Not like they ever could have been, after beating his pretty face bloody, but Billy hadn't ever wanted Steve *dead* . Not really, not ever, not when the rage that hadn't been meant for Steve had bled out of his cracked knuckles and his fractured nose.

The idea that he's missing is one thing. The idea that he's cold and gone and probably decaying in the dirt and debris of the forest that surrounds them is another.

But teenagers are shitty and they do shitty things, and Billy doesn't have anything better to do.

"He probably just-- just ran away," Tommy hiccups, sometime around midnight, leaning against the front of Billy's car, a handle of whiskey cradled to his chest.

Carol keeps stroking over his back.

"He's always fuckin' *running away* ," Tommy says, and Billy lifts a brow but doesn't ask, drags on a joint and passes it over to Carol over Tommy's head. "Always has. Since-- since we were little. Fuckin' pussy."

Carol makes a face and leans in, like she's telling a secret. "They were gonna go to the same college. Had it planned out, since freshman year. Then-- well."

"Then Nancy *fuckin'* Wheeler and Jonathan *the freak* Byers happened." Tommy grunts, takes a hefty swig, and Billy can't help but blink a few times. "Always runnin'-- from shit he didn't like, shit that scared him, shit that made him mad."

Billy doesn't think that's right. Has never seen Steve run *away* from anything.

But maybe Tommy knows better.

Either way, when the waterworks start happening, Billy takes it as his cue to step away. Says he's going to go *take a leak* , and leaves Tommy and Carol at the edges of the little gathering, fire lighting up their downturned faces in red. A macabre mockery of celebration. A mourning in disguise.

Billy thinks about losing his mother. About being so broken and sad that he'd burned bright with rage. Thinks about the firelight and Steve Harrington's pale face covered in red.

He can't bring himself to think about how pale and blue it would be, how dead and lifeless his brown eyes would be, if they found him cold and lonely on the forest floor. Can't think about how pale his mother's lips had looked, laid out on that hospital bed, flatline

ringing in his ears. Can't think about how awful Steve's mouth would look without life pulsing through him.

He ends up a ways into the woods, well past the sound and the light, and he lights up a cigarette if only to coax something vibrant into the cool blue of night. He ends up leaned against a big oak, hand planted against the bark, cigarette dangling from his lips as he pisses onto the roots.

That's when he hears it. The sound.

A *crack* of wood breaking. The whisper of leaves. The *panting* .

At first, he thinks maybe a couple of drunk idiots stumbled their way out into the dark for a quickie. Thinks it's a bit distasteful, but he can imagine it. Wanting to lose himself in the heat of somebody; even in summer, the nights in Indiana feel cold.

Then he hears the voice. The panicked, high string of whispers. The *no, no, no, please, no--*

He zips up quick and turns. Squints into the shadows between the trees.

He doesn't see anything until he *does* .

And when he does, it's Steve fucking Harrington, stumbling his way through the woods and toward the dim glow between the trees. It's Steve fucking Harrington, hair matted and skin sallow in the pale light that drips from above, a goddamn *hospital gown* draped over him and dark with dirt or blood or both. It's Steve *fucking* Harrington.

Billy's heart damn near jumps into his throat. He drops his cigarette, fingers shaking, and he can't move.

He's never believed in ghosts, but he thinks he might be seeing one, now.

"No, no, no," Steve is muttering under his breath, staggering and stopping every now and then, but definitely heading toward the light. "Gotta-- please, no, gotta run. *Gotta run.*"

He's got no shoes on. He's stumbling through the dark, through the forest, and he's got no shoes on.

Billy takes a step forward.

It's the movement that does it. Billy doesn't even have to say anything, but Steve is suddenly off his feet and falling back, *scrambling* to get away. His breath is coming more ragged, more short, his eyes wide and wild as the rest of him, as he claws back through the dirt on his hands.

"Gotta--" he hiccups, throat working, and then he *screams* . " *You have to run!*"

He lurches to his feet. Stumbles forward, closer to Billy, like he's half-dead and barely hanging on.

Billy catches him. He can't help but catch him.

His fingers curl, clutch into the fabric of Billy's shirt, and his pupils are blown out wide and Billy can see the split in his lip now and the blood running down from a gash just below his hairline. He smells like blood. Coppery and tangy and it makes Billy's mouth water in that painful way it does when you suck on something sour. He clings to Billy and Billy lets him.

"You have to run," he says, voice cracking, pulling at Billy's shirt. "You have to run, Billy, *you have to run --*"

"Harrington," Billy says, and his own voice sounds thick to his own ears. "Harrington, you-- what the *fuck* -- what are you talking about--?"

"They're right behind me," Steve tugs, but Billy hardly moves Steve is so weak, so shaken, falling apart against him. "They're right behind me, can't you--? They're *coming* and we *have to go* ."

"Who's coming?" Billy asks, but he doesn't take his eyes off of Steve's face to even bother looking, and Steve is already trying to get around him, bypass him, get to the party that's celebrating Steve Harrington's memory when he's right here in Billy's arms. "Harrington-- Steve , *jesus, fuck*, what's *wrong* with you?"

“ *Monsters* ,” Steve hisses, and he’s *quaking* , and his legs are giving out, and Billy holds him up because he’s not going to watch Steve fall to the ground like that again. “Monsters and monsters that look like men and-- *please* . Please, *please*, we have to go --”

“Okay,” Billy says, throat working as he swallows, and he doesn’t know what’s wrong, what’s happening, any of it-- but if Steve wants to go, Billy is gonna get him out of there. “Okay, let’s go. My car is right over there. We’re gonna go, Harrington. Okay?”

Steve is nodding his head like it might come off its hinges.

And that’s how Billy ends up half-carrying him away from the creeping shadows of the forest and closer and closer to the light.

Steve keeps muttering under his breath, shaking like a damn leaf against Billy’s side, and his fingers keep curling and uncurling into the shoulder of Billy’s jacket and the front of his shirt. Billy thinks he’s high. He *must* be high, but he doesn’t know on what.

Just that every little noise seems to startle him, make him jump in his own skin, and that he’s burning up plastered to Billy’s side. Like an inferno. It’s the only thing that reassures Billy that this isn’t a dream. That there’s a real, breathing person next to him.

When they stumble into the light, toward the Camaro, no one really notices. No one but Tommy and Carol, who are removed enough from the raging fire and still lingering by Billy’s car, to catch sight of them as they come.

“Steve?” Tommy gasps, and there’s vomit on his shoes and near Billy’s front tire-- and if he got any on the paint job, Billy’s gonna lay him out flat. “ *Steve* ?”

If the familiarity of another face was supposed to calm Steve down, it doesn’t. Steve instantly shies away, nearly goes toppling again if it wasn’t for Billy’s arm around his waist.

“Steve, man, oh-- oh, my *god* .” Tommy stumbles forward, and Billy finds himself putting his body between Tommy’s and Steve’s. “What-- What *happened* --?”

“Don’t think that much matters, right now.” Billy says. “Gonna need you and your girl to get outta my way.”

“What?” Tommy blinks up at him. “ *What* ? No. No, I gotta--” his voice cracks, and he gestures clumsily at where Steve is breathing heavy and hard. “What the fuck happened--? Why’s he--?”

“I don’t--”

“ *Why’s he bleeding* ?” Tommy’s voice is a wreck, and Carol is suddenly at his back, mute for the first time, her eyes wide, wide, wide. “Why’s he-- Why’s he *dressed* like that?”

“ *I don’t know* ,” Billy snaps. “I’m taking him to the hospital.”

“ *You* ?” Tommy scoffs. “You-- You beat his face in!”

“Yeah, and you didn’t have a problem with it at the time, as I remember.” Billy says, and he’s right.

Tommy had taken a keen kind of glee of rubbing Steve’s swollen face in every chance he got. Slapping Billy on the back all the while.

It’s enough to smack some sense into Tommy. Enough to make him back down and step aside so that Billy can finish muscling the shaking mess that is Steve Harrington into his car.

He gets him in the passenger seat. Treats him with as much care as he knows how-- but Billy’s hands aren’t made for tenderness. He only knows how to break things, how to be jagged and rough. And Steve seems to be curling away from everything, flinching back, eyes darting to shadows like they might turn into the monsters he keeps rambling about.

After buckling him in, after shutting the door, Billy turns to where Carol and Tommy are still hovering. They aren’t looking at Billy. They’re staring past him, into the car, and Billy has to clear his throat to catch their attention.

“Listen,” he says. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on, but neither of you opens your mouth. Got it?”

Tommy nods, throat working. But Carol's nose wrinkles up.

"Not a damn word," Billy insists. "Either of you."

He doesn't wait for them to reply. Doesn't look to see if anyone else saw. He's doing enough already, he thinks.

But when he rounds the Camaro, climbs into the driver's seat, and peels out and away from the quarry, he's honestly got no clue what he's doing. Where he's going. What the actual *fuck* he's going to do about Steve, broken and shaking, in his passenger seat.

He nearly drives right off the road when Steve's hand snaps out and wraps around Billy's wrist. When he chances a glance over, Steve's grip increasing by the second, until Billy winces and the bones grind, Steve is staring out the passenger window and not breathing at all.

He's about to pull over, to stop and see what's going on, but when Steve looks back at him, his eyes are wide with fear.

"Go faster," he says.

So Billy does.

Billy *knows* he should take Steve to a fucking hospital. Or to the police station. Or *anywhere but the goddamn Byers' house* .

He ends up kicking up gravel as he rolls up the driveway anyway.

When he comes to a stop, headlights shining against the front door, it cracks and a woman Billy recognizes as Joyce Byers peers out, squinting into the light. Billy kills the engine, opens the door, and steps out.

"Can I help you?" she asks.

"I certainly fucking hope so," Billy grunts as he rounds the car to the otherside, opening it up, and bracing Steve on his shaking legs as he steps out.

Joyce's face crumples in relief. " *Steve .* "

She's there, at Billy's side and taking Steve's face between her hands, in an instant. He flinches, just like with Tommy, but doesn't try and hide from her touch.

When she pulls away, lines of horror etch into her features as her fingertips come away bloody. She reaches for Steve's chin, careful as she tilts it over, and the way that he *lets her* , eyes dazed and detached, makes something cold and vile pit in Billy's stomach.

There's blood coming out of his ears. Fresh. Billy feels sick.

"Okay," Joyce breathes out, then sucks in a tight gasp and stands straighter, eyes on Billy. "Help me get him inside where we can clean him up."

Billy nods, a bit dumb and a bit dazed himself, and when Steve refuses to budge, starts to shake his head and back away, Billy scoops him right off of his feet.

"No. *No !*" Steve shouts, squirms in Billy's arms, and Billy grits his teeth and tightens his hold. "They're-- They're *coming* ! Joyce, they're coming, we can't-- *we can't stay here .* "

"Nothing's," Joyce's voice breaks as she leads Billy, with Steve in his arms, toward the house. "Nothing's coming, sweetie. There's nothing-- there's nothing--"

"I can hear them," Steve insists, and he's fighting, shoving at Billy's chest and his shoulder, but he's so damn *weak* ; Billy doesn't remember him being this weak. "I can *hear them* . Can't you hear them screaming?"

"No," Joyce says, and there are tears in her eyes as she lets Billy into the house and locks the door behind her. "No, I can't hear them, sweetie, but I believe you. I'm-- I'm gonna radio Hopper. He's gonna be right over with El--"

" *No !*" This time, when Steve shoves, it's with renewed strength, like the unfamiliar name means something more to him, and Billy nearly drops him, wincing as blunt nails catch his cheek. "No, you can't--"

you *can't* --"

He ends up half throwing Steve down onto the couch. Ends up fighting his flailing hands to keep him from getting back on his battered and bloodied feet. Crouched in front of him, Billy catches his wrists and fights them down against Steve's chest as he arches, squirms, tries his damndest to get Billy off of him.

As he holds Steve down, trying his best not to hurt him worse-- because in the light he can *see* , see it all, the bruises and the blood on his hospital gown and the scratches on his arms and the blood under his nails-- Joyce darts out of the room. Billy grits his teeth as tears pour down Steve's face.

"Billy," he whispers, frantic, and *god* , his pupils are blown all to shit. "Billy, *please* . We-- You don't understand-- We're not safe. *We're not safe* ."

Joyce appears at his side out of nowhere. There's a needle in her hand. A needle that looks very familiar.

"Hold him down," she says, just as frantic.

Steve whimpers, thrashing anew, and Billy swallows down bile and holds him.

"No," he pants, pressing back into the couch, but Billy's hands are bruising on him now, tight and unyielding, and Joyce sinks the needle into Steve's arm and pushes the plunger. "*Nononopleaseno* ."

"I'm sorry," Joyce says, but whatever is in that needle is powerful, because Billy can feel Steve's muscles already going lax. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm sorry."

She pushes his hair away from his face, her lips between her teeth. Steve gives one last little thrash before going completely pliant. Before lulling off. Before his eyes droop.

Once he's out. Once he's down, chest rising and falling more evenly, though with a hitch here and there, Joyce pulls away. Billy lets go.

She turns to him, eyes wet, and places a hand on his shoulder. "Stay

with him?" she asks.

And Billy thinks: *where else would I go ?*

Billy cleans Steve up, the best that he can, while Joyce first makes a phone call and then manically hunts through her house for a handheld radio. He listens, absently, and thinks he hears her say the Chief's name and then something about *bringing the doctor* , but he's consumed, mostly, by wiping the blood from Steve's skin.

He takes care of his feet first. Because that's easy. Because he doesn't have to look at Steve's face.

Joyce gives him a first aid kit, and Billy liberally applies the gauze to Steve's feet after he washes them clean of the dirt and blood caked between his toes.

When that's done, he works on his hands and his arms. There isn't too much to do there. The scratches are superficial; they look like Steve did them himself, like he'd tried to scratch his own skin off. It doesn't make them easier to look at. Nor do the bruises that look like Steve was strapped down and fought against it.

Billy's seen a lot. But he's never seen this.

When he finally gets to his face, cleaning the blood from his ears, Steve's jaw cradled in one hand, Billy can't help but feel stupidly, horribly grateful. Steve bloodied and bruised, Steve half out of his mind, is better than what he'd been picturing earlier that night.

If Billy lingers at Steve's lips, flush with life and not cold, cold and terribly blue, his thumb dragging along the soft pink curve of his mouth as he cleans the split in his lip, no one but Joyce is there to notice. And she doesn't.

By the time he's done, there's the lights from another car rolling up outside. Billy carefully drapes a blanket over Steve and pushes to his feet, feeling like he's about to crawl out of his own skin and bolt, as Joyce opens the door and lets the Chief of Police in, a small girl at his flank.

Chief Hopper sidles in, his hands on his belt, and first he looks at Steve, mouth pressed thin. Then he looks at Billy.

"I don't know anything, I didn't see shit." Billy says, eyeing the door, but then Hopper clears his throat.

"Sorry, kid. But that's not how this is gonna work."

Billy ends up sat on the loveseat across from Steve, Joyce hovering as Hopper crouches in front of Steve. He stares, elbows on his knees and hands in knots in front of himself, as the Chief dips a rag in some ammonia.

The girl he came in with is standing off to Billy's left. She's in overalls that are too big for her, and her hair is a mess of curls. She's staring at Steve. Won't take her eyes off of him.

"You're sure about this?" Joyce hovers, helpless, one arm over her chest, a hand pressed to her mouth.

"I gotta know," Hopper says. "If he said anything, I've gotta know. And the doc can't make it until morning."

"He was out of it, Hop. I don't know what he's gonna be able to tell you."

"More than if we let the drugs work out of system," Hopper says with a grimace, and then holds the rag up to Steve's nose.

He wakes with his face scrunching up, his nose wrinkling, and it's such a familiar look of distaste, of annoyance, that Billy feels something warm uncurl in his chest. He wants to blame it on the booze.

He knows he's too sober for that.

Steve's eyes open. When he sees Hopper, he sits straight up, and Hopper reaches up to steady him, hands big on Steve's shoulders.

"Hop," he says, voice rough.

“Hey, kid.” Hopper offers up a tight smile. “You with us?”

“Hop,” he repeats, and his voice pitches a little lower. “Hop, I messed up. I messed up.”

“Hey, no. You’re fine. You didn’t mess up, kid.” Hopper says. “Not at all.”

“No, I did. I wasn’t-- I wasn’t careful enough, and they--” Steve’s eyes, still dark with the dilation of his pupils, dart up and catch on the girl hovering at Billy’s left.

His face crumbles. His breath catches on a sob. Billy is itching to get to his feet, to push Hopper aside, to--

To do something. Anything to get Steve out of here.

He doesn’t.

“I’m sorry,” Steve hitches, and his chest starts rising and falling in that terrible, ragged way it was earlier, like he can’t catch his own breath, like he can’t breathe at all. “I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. El--”

“*Hey*,” Hopper’s fingers dig in at Steve’s shoulders and he gives him a little shake, until Steve’s big, tearful doe eyes dart back down to him. “You didn’t mess up, Steve. You hear me? You *didn’t mess up*. But I gotta know what you told ‘em. I gotta know what you said.”

“I told them-- I told them *everything*.” Steve says, and he’s breaking apart in Hopper’s hands, and Billy can’t help but shove to his feet.

He stops himself, once he’s there, hands curling and uncurling at his sides. Joyce is staring at him, and so is the girl.

Steve is sobbing. “*I told them everything*.”

Hopper lets out a breath. Sharp and short. He squeezes at Steve’s shoulders.

“About the cabin. About-- about *El*. I told them-- I told them everything.” Steve says, voice nothing but a breath. “I’m sorry. *I’m*

sorry .”

“Don’t be,” Hopper says, and he smooths his hand over the top of Steve’s head, leans up on his knees and takes Steve into his arms, lets him break apart against his shoulder. “Don’t be sorry, kid. You did good. You did perfect.”

But Steve is still apologizing. Still saying sorry.

And Billy can’t watch it anymore.

He storms outside. He would go straight for the Camaro, but the Chief took his keys.

He didn’t take his smokes or his lighter.

He lights up with trembling fingers. Drags hard and exhales. It doesn’t do anything for him.

The door opens and then shuts again behind him. Billy stuffs his hand into the pocket of his jacket and pulls on his cigarette again. He peers down at Joyce Byers through a cloud of smoke.

“I’m sure you have a lot of questions,” she says.

He does. He wants to know what the fuck is going on. Wants to know who did that to Steve. Wants to know what it has to do with that little girl standing in the living room.

But those all take a back burner.

“Just one,” Billy says. “Will he be okay?”

Joyce’s lips press tight as she stares up at Billy, her hands wringing in front of herself. Billy’s jaw ticks tight. He doesn’t want to be lied to. But he’s bracing for it.

“I don’t know what I can tell you,” Joyce says, after a moment, and she pulls out her own cigarette-- Billy holds out his lighter and she leans into the flame. “And I don’t know all of the details. But he was taken by people, bad people, who wanted information that he wouldn’t give.”

“So they beat it out of him,” Billy says.

Joyce’s mouth pinches up. “So they beat it out of him. Among other things.”

“Other things?”

“Drugs, probably.” Joyce says, then sighs. “Definitely. Probably LSD-- that’s what they used-- well, they’ve used it before.”

Billy doesn’t know what he’s missing. Doesn’t really care. Not about all of the details or the things she isn’t saying.

He just cares about the boy in the living room, the one who clung to him, who seems broken beyond repair. And he doesn’t know why.

“As for whether or not he’ll be okay,” Joyce shrugs, and the movement looks jerky and stilted. “I don’t know. But he’s a strong kid. So, I hope so.”

Billy hopes so too. He really does.

Billy’s halfway through his pack when the kids come rolling up on their bikes. He’s not surprised, exactly, to see them. Figured it might just be a matter of time.

He’s honestly still waiting for Jonathan Byers to show up, fringe in his eyes, to try and glare Billy off of his front porch.

Billy’s been out here long enough that his fingers and his joints are a little stiff when he stands. It’s not that he doesn’t want to go inside, see if Steve has stopped crying; it’s that he *can’t* . Can’t stand the idea of seeing that look on his face again.

Max is standing on the back spokes of Lucas Sinclair’s bike, clutching at his shoulders. When she sees Billy, her eyes go wide, and then her face scrunches up and she hops off of Lucas’ bike before he even stops it and goes jogging up to him.

“Billy, what are you doing here?” she asks, and he can’t help but

remember the last time she asked him that at this house, and the way he split his knuckles open over Steve's face.

He's tired of thinking of Steve's face covered in blood.

"Max, I need you to listen to me." Billy says, and he knows it's the wrong thing to say because her shoulders draw up, and she tries to dart around him to the door.

He catches her by the arm. The boys are already yelling.

"Max," Billy's temples ache; he's been grinding his teeth too much today. "I can't let you guys go in there, right now."

"Why not?" Max pulls, whips around, hair flying. "Why *not*?"

"We *know* Steve's in there," Dustin says, and he doesn't even bother parking his bike, throwing it to the ground.

"You can't go in there, Max." Billy says, and his grip goes too tight, he knows it, because Max's face twists up. "I can't let you go in there."

"Billy--"

The door swings open. Hopper stands there, his work belt long discarded and his uniform unbuttoned to reveal the white shirt beneath.

His eyes narrow on the kids gathered just outside, and they fall quiet under that look. When his gaze falls on Billy, he lets Max go and steps back.

"Hargrove," he gestures with two fingers. "I need you inside. I'll take care of the rugrats."

Dustin stomps his way up the stairs. "I want to see Steve."

"Not right now, buddy." Hopper says. "Hargrove. Inside."

Billy goes. Slides past Hopper and through the door. Makes sure to shut it behind himself. He hears the protests, even through the

hardwood.

But they don't matter. Not when he sees Steve.

The girl, El, is standing in front of him at the couch. Steve's got his hands scrunched up in her overalls, the top of his head pressed to her belly, and his shoulders are shaking. She just stares down at him, carefully carding her fingers through his hair.

Billy watches, something hard in his throat, as she takes Steve's face between her hands and tilts it up. Makes Steve look at her, his lashes wet and clinging together.

"You did good," she says, and her voice has an odd cadence, like she's saying something foreign, or repeating something she doesn't quite understand the meaning of.

"I didn't. I'm so sorry, El." Steve says, shaking his head, and her palms squish his cheeks a little, and her face scrunches up like she's trying to figure out how to piece something back together that's been broken. "They're coming, and it's my -- it's my fault. I can hear them. They're *everywhere*."

"No," she says. "No monsters. Not when I'm here."

And somehow-- somehow that *works*. A little girl telling Steve that she'll keep the monsters away *works*.

He sags, nodding, and snuffles as he breathes out another apology.

That's when Joyce clears her throat. Billy blinks over at her, and he realizes he's shaking and his hands are in fists at his sides.

"We need to get him in bed. Get him to rest and try and sleep off whatever else they have in his system." She says, and her eyes are on Billy. "Can you help me?"

Billy doesn't hesitate. "Yes."

The thing is, Billy knows there's something bigger going on. He

knows that there's something no one is telling him -- but he doesn't ask, either.

Doesn't care enough to know where Hopper whisks El off to. Doesn't care enough to know how his kid sister got tangled up in something that ended up in a night like this-- with a missing boy found, bloodied and beaten, and begging to be forgiven. Doesn't care about the hissed whispers he can hear through Jonathan Byers' bedroom door as he settles Steve onto the edge of the bed.

What he does care about are the bruises he sees on Steve's skin when they finally get him out of that hospital gown. The welts on his back and the backs of his thighs. The burn marks across his chest and, he realizes as he passes a warm, damp washcloth over Steve's jaw and neck, at his temples.

"What did they do to you?" he breathes.

Steve blinks at him, like he's just realizing Billy is there. He grimaces and winces from Billy's touch, despite how gentle it is.

He stares down at Billy where he's sat, in a pair of Jonathan's sweats and nothing else. And there's some amount of clarity there, something fever bright and terrified in his eyes, but he leans back into the slow drag of the washcloth over his skin, and Billy feels his own breath shudder out of him at the blind trust, the blind faith, that Billy's hands are kinder than whoever did this.

"They tried to make my insides sing," Steve says, and Billy can see Joyce freeze by the dresser where she's digging for a shirt that will fit out of the corner of his eye. "Hooked me up to a machine and turned it on until I did. I almost bit my tongue off."

Joyce closes the drawer with a clatter. It snaps whatever focus Steve seemed to have, because he startles away, a sound choking out of the back of his throat.

Billy reaches for him. Takes his face between his hands, washcloth dropped to the side, and forces Steve to look at him instead of whatever illusion of a monster that isn't there.

“Hey. Hey, easy.” Billy says, and his voice is rough, so rough, and he has to swallow. “Easy, Harrington. You’re safe. You’re fine.”

It takes a second. Steve keeps twitching, like he’s tweaked up, and with what Joyce mentioned outside, that makes sense.

But then he focuses back on Billy’s face.

“Steve,” he says.

Billy frowns. “What?”

“King Steve,” he says. “That’s what you call me.”

Billy very nearly laughs. “King Steve. Yeah. Hate to break it to ya, but you don’t look like much of a king, right now.”

Steve snorts, and reaches up. Like he might bat Billy’s hands away.

He doesn’t.

Instead, he curls his fingers loose around Billy’s wrists and squeezes. Billy forgets how to breathe.

“Thank you,” Steve says, and then drops his hands again.

Billy’s throat works. “Anytime.”

He’s surprised by how much he means it.

Once Steve’s settled, once he’s in bed, the lights on and the door cracked, Billy hovers outside the door.

He can hear the kids, down the hall, peppering Joyce with question after question. Sometimes she even gives them an answer.

Billy stays, sat outside in the hall, head pressed to the door jamb, listening. To Steve breathe. To the kids growing more frantic. To his own pounding heart.

“Is he okay?”

“What happened?”

“Is the Gate open again?”

“Why can't we see him?”

Billy closes his eyes.

He thinks it's only for a second. But then, he's startling awake, and there's the early light of dawn creeping into the house.

The whole place is quiet. Except for the whisper of the door opening behind him.

Billy blinks up at Steve Harrington. He's no more battered than he was the day before, but there are lines around his mouth and between his brows as he frowns down at Billy.

He looks awake. He looks *alive* .

“King Steve,” Billy says.

Steve doesn't stop frowning. But he holds out a hand.

“Have you been here all night?” he asks, and Billy stares at the tips of Steve's fingers, at the blood still under his nails.

He takes Steve's hand, to give him the peace of mind, but muscles his aching body off of the floor without putting a fraction of his weight into Steve's palm.

“Depends,” he says. “Is it morning?”

Steve stares at him like he's a puzzle. “Yes.”

“Then, yes.”

He sees the *why* on Steve's mouth. On his face. In his eyes.

God , Steve's eyes are so bright. Burning with focus.

Billy would say he looks good, but he doesn't. He just looks... *better* .

So, he says that.

“Thanks?” Steve says, and then startles and jerks his hand away, like he's just remembered it was still in Billy's. “I -- You found me. Last night. In the woods?”

“More like you found me,” Billy says, hand dropping to his side, and his fingers flex out, tingling. “How much do you remember?”

Steve lips press thin.

Then, across the hall, a door cracks open. Will Byers pokes his sleepy head out and blinks up at the two of them.

“Steve?” he blinks again, and then opens his door wider. “*Steve !*”

He lunges across the hall, arms looping around Steve's waist, and Steve has to brace himself back with a hand against the door jamb.

He grunts, face twisting up, but then he huffs out a laugh, scrubbing a hand through Will's messy mop of hair.

It's the only thing that keeps Billy from yanking the kid back and tearing him a new one.

“Hey, Freak Jr.” Steve says. “Guess who's the zombie boy, now?”

Will laughs against Steve's stomach. Then, the whole house wakes up.

By the time everything has settled back down, by the time breakfast is on the table and Billy's got a hot mug of coffee pressed between his hands courtesy of Joyce, Steve has been hugged by everyone at least once, showered, changed, and then been hugged again.

The kids are all piled in the living room, watching cartoons and eating cereal straight out of the box, like this kind of shit happens everyday. In the kitchen, Steve sits at the table, stiff but not shaking anymore. Not crumbling apart like he had been the night before.

Billy doesn't know when, but sometime during the night, Nancy

Wheeler and Jonathan Byers showed up. They look a little rough around the edges, hovering around Steve like they're afraid he might disappear right before their eyes, but so does Hopper when he places a hand on Steve's shoulder, squeezes, and tells him *it's been taken care of, it's gonna be okay*.

Steve seems to take that with a grain of salt, if the tight smile on his face is anything to go by.

Billy doesn't think Steve is gonna be okay for a long while.

There's another face, too. One Billy doesn't recognize, but who they all call *doc*, and he checks Steve over thoroughly in one of the back rooms before sitting him down and running through lingering symptoms he might feel from prolonged exposure to LSD and whatever else they did to him.

It's not pretty, but Billy thinks Steve says it best.

"Well, at least I'm alive, right?"

It's a joke. They all take it as one. Billy feels his stomach roll.

He only feels worse when Hopper levels Steve with a look and they talk about his *cover story*. About how he went off, last minute, to follow some band touring around when he heard they were in Indianapolis, and got himself into a bit of trouble. It fills Billy with a keen kind of rage, something restless and that he doesn't understand, and he knows he needs to step away.

He ends up out back, sitting on the stoop that leads to the backyard, cigarette in one hand and coffee in the other. He wishes it were something stronger.

But he's not out there alone for long. Soon, the door opens behind him, and Steve steps out, breathing long and deep as he presses his back to the closed door.

He's beautiful, Billy realizes. Even bruised and pale and barely holding it together. He's beautiful. The long slope of his neck as he leans his head back. The way his hair lays, still damp from his shower, fringe hanging over his brow. The way his lashes fan out

across his cheeks as he closes his eyes. The part of his lips, red and full of life.

He's beautiful. And Billy is so, so happy he found him out in the woods.

"Hey," Billy says.

Steve looks down at him, grin crooked and forced and all wrong, but Billy doesn't mind. "Hey."

"You good?" he asks, but he thinks he knows the answer; he holds out his cigarette anyway, like an olive branch.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good." Steve lies, and shuffles carefully on his feet until he can take a seat next to Billy on the stoop, plucking up the cigarette, smile going a little more easy. "Thanks."

"No problem."

"What are you doing out here?" Steve asks, after a long pull, breathing out smoke with his words.

"Too many people for my taste." Billy shrugs.

Steve tilts his head, pursing his mouth and then wincing, thumbing at the split in his lip as he passes the cigarette back. "That's funny."

"Why?"

Steve shrugs, a bit tentative, and Billy watches him-- doesn't take his eyes off of him. Like maybe he's a little afraid Steve might disappear right in front of him, too.

"You always seemed to like to be the center of attention."

Billy snorts, but nods. "Different kind of scene."

"True," Steve bobs his head, throat working, and he stares forward, out into the woods for a long minute.

He seems to get lost there. In between the trees. Just staring, eyes

going a little glassy, and Billy wonders if he's stumbling through the dark again, running from monsters only he can see.

He clears his throat, and draws Steve's attention back. "Why are you out here?"

Steve's throat works, and he flaps his hand back over his shoulder, cringing a little. "Too many... people."

Billy's grin goes wry, and he offers the cigarette again. "It's stifling."

"Yeah," Steve says, takes it, and doesn't actually pull on it, just stares at it as the end burns. "Yeah, that's a good word for it."

There's a silence that falls over them. Billy isn't sure what to do. How to try and make this better, easier, for Steve. He's not made for comfort, has built himself on that fact, and he doesn't know how to offer it now.

He doesn't have to. Doesn't have to fill the quiet, because Steve does it for him, looking him in the eye and smiling an odd, twisted little smile.

"You probably have a lot of questions," Steve says.

Billy thinks back to Joyce saying that, too. Remembers what he cared about knowing then. Knows what he cares about knowing now.

"Just one," he says. "You gonna be okay?"

Steve's eyes go a little wide. He leans back, lips parted, and stares at Billy like he's never seen him before.

It makes Billy feel a little guilty. Stomach twisting. But he should know better. He's never given Steve any reason to think he was decent. It would be a surprise, now.

But Steve-- Steve smiles at him, slow and tentative. Careful. Like he's not sure how real the expression is on his own face.

"Honestly?" he asks.

Billy shifts a little. “Well, I think we both know how I feel about you lying to my face.”

Steve barks out a small laugh, shakes his head, and finally takes a drag on the cigarette before passing it back again. Their fingers brush, maybe linger, but neither of them mention it.

“I think I’ll be okay,” Steve says. “Maybe. Hopefully.”

“Hopefully,” Billy repeats back, and he nearly jumps right out of his own skin when Steve knocks his knee against Billy’s.

“Yeah, dickbag,” Steve says. “Hopefully. You think I can predict the future or some shit?”

“Well, you were going on about monsters last night.”

Steve huffs, mouth pressing thin as he looks back forward and out into the woods, but he’s still smiling. It looks real. It looks real and Billy put that there. Billy made him smile, somehow, even after the nightmare he’s been through.

Billy doesn’t want to think about why his chest unfurls with warmth at the sight.

“Thank you,” Steve says, glancing back over at him, elbows on his knees. “For last night. For helping me. Thank you.”

Billy stares at him for a long second. “Anytime,” he says.

He knows he means it.